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William J. Clinton

Remarks at the Presentation of the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights

December 10, 1998

Thank you very much. I want to welcome all of you here, the Members of Congress, the members of our foreign policy team who have worked on this, National Security Adviser Berger, Under Secretary Loy, Assistant Secretary Koh. I welcome Ambassador Nancy Rubin, the Ambassador of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights; Theresa Loar, the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues; members of the Roosevelt family; and other distinguished guests.

I would like to say also, before getting into my prepared remarks, that someday when I write the memoirs of these last several years, one of the proudest moments of our administration for me will be the work the First Lady has done to advance the cause of human rights. I remember the speech she gave in Beijing on a rainy day when people were struggling through the mud to get into that remote facility, the talk she gave just a few days ago at Gaston Hall at Georgetown University about Eleanor Roosevelt—I think one of the finest speeches she ever gave—but more important, the concrete work, the Vital Voices work in Northern Ireland and Latin America and all the little villages she visited in Latin America and Africa and Asia, on the Indian Subcontinent to try to advance the condition of women and children, especially young girls.

And I think that every person who has ever been the parent of a daughter could identify strongly with the remarks she just made and the brave women who were just introduced.

You know, most of us, at least who have reached a certain age, we look forward to the holidays when our daughters come home from college, and they have the human right to decide whether they want to come home or not. [*Laughter*] When our daughters are married, and they have our grandchildren,

we hope they'll find a way to come home. Imagine—I just wish there were some way for every American citizen to imagine how they would feel if the people Hillary just discussed were their daughters. I hope we can do more.

We are sponsoring these awards today and announcing them because, as all of you know so well, 50 years ago in Paris the U.N. General Assembly voted to approve the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was a watershed moment for what was then a very young United Nations; a new chapter, however, in a much, much older story, the unending striving of humanity to realize its potential in the life of every person.

For its time, the Universal Declaration was quite bold. If you look at the way the world is going today, it's still quite a bold document. Like all great breakthroughs, it was an act of imagination and courage, an opening of the heart and the mind with spare elegance. It served notice that for all our differences, we share a common birthright.

You know, it's easy for us to forget, but if you think back to 1948, it might not have been particularly easy to affirm faith in mankind's future. After all, it was just 3 years after a cataclysmic war and the Holocaust; the cold war was beginning to blight the post-war landscape; millions and millions more would die just in the Soviet Union under the terror of Stalin.

But this document did reaffirm faith in humankind. It is really the Magna Carta of our humanity. Article I states that: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

There are no commas or parentheses in this sentence, no qualifications or exceptions, just the power of affirmation.

Other articles assert the freedom to worship, to work, to assemble, to participate in a life of meaning and purpose. Those words have now been translated into every language of the United Nations. Though 50 years old, they still ring free, fresh, and powerful, don't they? They resonate today, because today human dignity is still under siege, not something that can be taken for granted anywhere.

We all know how much the Declaration owed to the remarkable leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt. She rose to every challenge. She defended American idealism. She honestly admitted our own imperfections. She always called on the best from each delegate, and she called on it again and again and again. Indeed, a delegate from Panama grew so exhausted by the pace that he had to remind Mrs. Roosevelt that the delegates had human rights, too. [Laughter]

Today we celebrate the life of this document and the lives it has saved and enhanced. Mrs. Roosevelt worried that it would be hard to translate ideas on paper into real places, into kitchens and factories and ghettos and prisons. But words have power. Ideas have power. And the march for human rights has steadily gained ground.

Since 1948, the United Nations have adopted legal instruments against torture, genocide, slavery, apartheid, and discrimination against women and children. As nations grow more interdependent, the idea of a unified standard of human rights becomes easier to define and, more important than ever, to maintain.

Obviously, all nations have more work to do, and the United States is no exception. We must improve our own record. We must correct our own mistakes, even as we fulfill our responsibility to insist on improvement in other nations; in totalitarian states, like North Korea; in military dictatorships, like Burma; in countries where leaders practice the politics of ethnic hatred, like Serbia and Iraq; in African nations where tribal differences have led to unimaginable slaughter; in nations where tolerance and faith must struggle against intolerant fundamentalism, like Afghanistan and Sudan; in Cuba, where persons who strive for peaceful democratic change still are repressed and imprisoned; in China, where change has come to people's daily lives, but where basic political rights are still denied to too many.

Some suggest today that it is sheer arrogance for the President or for the United States to discuss such matters in other countries. Some say it is because we are not perfect here at home. If we had to wait for perfection, none of us would ever advance in any way. Some say it is because there are

Asian values or African values or Western values dividing the human race into various sub-categories. Well, let's be honest. There are. There are genuine cultural differences which inevitably lead to different political and social structures. And that can be all to the good, because no one has a corner on the truth. It makes life more interesting.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not say there are no differences among people. It says what we have in common is more fundamental than our differences, and therefore, all the differences must be expressed within certain limits beyond which we dare not go without violating our common humanity.

This is a phony attack on those of you who fight every day for human rights. None of us want everyone to be the same; none of us want to have all the same religious practices; none of us want to have all the same social and political structures; none of us say we know exactly how life should be organized everywhere under all circumstances and how every problem should be solved. We say we have a common humanity and whatever you think should be done differently must be done within the limits that respects our common humanity.

Now, that means a lot to us on the verge of a new century, where freedom and knowledge and flexibility will mean more to people than ever before, where people in the poorest villages on every continent on this Earth will have a chance to leapfrog years and years and years of the development process simply because of the communications revolution, if we respect universal human rights.

The Vice President said so well recently, in Asia, that we believe the peaceful democratic process that we have strongly endorsed will be even more essential to the world on the threshold of this new millennium. Throughout 1998, old fears and hatreds crumbled before the healing power of honest communication, faith in the future, a strong will for a better future.

Today in Oslo—I'm happy about this—today in Oslo, two leaders from Northern Ireland, John Hume and David Trimble, are

receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts on the Good Friday accord. In the Middle East, where I will go in 2 days, Palestinians and Israelis are struggling to bridge mutual distrust to implement the Wye accords. In Kosovo, a serious humanitarian crisis has been averted, and the process toward reconciliation continues in Bosnia. All these breakthroughs were triumphs for human rights.

Today we recommit ourselves to the ideas of the Universal Declaration, to keep moving toward the promise outlined in Paris 50 years ago.

First, we're taking steps to respond quickly to genocidal conditions, through the International Coalition Against Genocide I announced during my visit to Africa and a new genocide early warning center sponsored by the Department of State and the CIA. We will provide additional support to the U.N. Torture Victims Fund and genocide survivors in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Cambodia. We will continue assistance to women suffering under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. And USAID will provide up to \$8 million to NGO's to enhance their ability to respond more rapidly to human rights emergencies.

Second, we must do more for children who have always been especially vulnerable to human rights violations. This year I sought and Congress provided dramatic new support for the fight against child labor with a tenfold increase in United States assistance to the International Labor Organization. Today the Immigration and Naturalization Service is issuing new guidelines for the evaluation of asylum claims by children, making the process better serve our youngest and most vulnerable asylum seekers.

Third, we must practice at home what we preach abroad. Just this morning I signed an Executive order that strengthens our ability to implement human rights treaties and creates an interagency group to hold us accountable for progress in honoring those commitments.

Fourth, I am concerned about aliens who suffer abuses at the hands of smugglers and sweatshop owners. These victims actually have a built-in disincentive—their unlawful status here—that discourages them from complaining to U.S. authorities. So I'm ask-

ing the Department of Justice to provide legislative options to address this problem. And I know the Deputy Attorney General, Eric Holder, and the Deputy Secretary of Labor, Kitty Higgins, are here, and I trust they will work on this, because I know they care as much about it as I do.

Finally, I'd like to repeat my support for two top legislative priorities, an employment nondiscrimination act that would ban discrimination against gays and lesbians in the workplace, and a hate crimes prevention act. Last year, the entire Nation was outraged by the brutal killings of Matthew Shepard, a young gay student in Wyoming, and James Byrd, an African-American in Texas. All Americans are entitled to the same respect and legal protection, no matter their race, their gender, their sexual orientation. I agree with something President Truman once said, "When I say Americans, I mean all Americans."

We will never relinquish the fight to move forward in the continuing struggle for human rights. I am aware that much of the best work in human rights has been done by those outside government: students and activists, NGO's, brave religious leaders, people from all backgrounds who simply want a better, safer world for their children. Many have done so in the face of great adversity, the imprisoned members of the Internal Dissidents Working Group in Cuba, the political prisoners of the National League for Democracy in Burma, the imprisoned dissidents in China. We make common cause with them all.

That is why today we are presenting the first Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights to four outstanding Americans, not only for their own efforts but because we know that, by working together, we can do more. From different backgrounds and generations, they stand, all, in the great tradition of Eleanor Roosevelt, pioneers in the fight to expand the frontiers of freedom: Robert Bernstein, a pathbreaker for freedom of expression and the protection of rights at home and abroad; Bette Bao Lord, the head of Freedom House, a prolific author and campaigner; Dorothy Thomas, a champion of women's rights, the voice of a new generation committed to human rights; and John Lewis,

a veteran in the civil rights struggle, now serving his Congress with great distinction in the House of Representatives.

I would like to ask the military aide to read the citations.

[At this point, Lt. Comdr. Wesley Huey, USN, Naval Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the awards.]

I'd like to ask the members of the Roosevelt family who are here to stand. [Applause] Thank you.

The day the U.N. delegates voted to approve the declaration, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "Long job over." [Laughter] One of the few mistakes she ever made. [Laughter] She left us and all our successors a big job that will never be over, for the Universal Declaration contains an eternal promise, one embraced by our Founders in 1776, one that has to be reaffirmed every day in every way.

In our country, each generation of Americans has had to do it: in the struggle against slavery led by President Lincoln, in FDR's Four Freedoms, in the unfinished work of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, in the ongoing work here in this room.

I have learned in ways large and small in the last 6 years that there is within every person a scale of justice and that people can too easily be herded into hatred and extremism, often out of a belief that they have absolute truth and, therefore, are entitled to absolute power, that they can ignore any constitution, any laws, override any facts. There will always be work to be done. And again, I would say to you that this award we gave to these four richly deserving people is also for all of you who labor for human rights.

In the prolog of John Lewis's magnificent autobiography, "Walking With the Wind," he tells a stunning story that has become a metaphor for his life and is a metaphor for your work, about being a little boy with his brothers and sisters and cousins in the house of a relative, that was a very fragile house, when an enormous wind came up. And he said he was told that all the children had to hold hands, and one corner of the house would blow up in the wind and all the children would walk, holding hands, to the corner, and it would go down. And then another would

come up, and all the children would hold hands again and go to the other corner until the house came down. And by walking with the wind, hand-in-hand, they saved the house and the family and the children.

John says that that walk is a struggle to find the beloved community. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights applies to individuals, but it can only be achieved by our common community.

Thank you, and God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:39 a.m. in Room 450 of the Old Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble and Social Democratic Party leader John Hume of Northern Ireland.

Proclamation 7158—Human Rights Day, Bill of Rights Day, and Human Rights Week, 1998

December 10, 1998

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Thanks to the foresight of our Founding Fathers and their commitment to human rights, we live in a Nation founded upon the principles of equality, justice, and freedom—principles guaranteed to us by our Constitution. With the memory of tyranny fresh in their minds, the members of the First Congress of the United States proposed constitutional amendments known as the Bill of Rights, making explicit and forever protecting our Nation's cherished freedoms of religion, speech, press, and assembly.

But human rights have never been solely a domestic concern. Americans have always sought to share these rights with oppressed people around the world. In his annual message to the Congress, on January 6, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt articulated this desire: "In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want . . .